

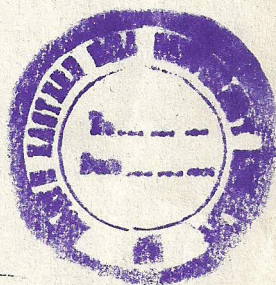
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# **Social Tensions in Assam**

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Middle Class Politics

**Apurba Kumar Baruah**



**Purbanchal Prakash**

G.N. Bordoloi Road, Ambari  
Guwahati- 781 001

### **About the Book :**

Assamese nationalism and its consequences for the smaller communities of Assam, Assamese-Bengali relations, problems of land reforms and the nature of student movements are some live issues of contemporary Assamese Society. In these essays Baruah analyses certain critical aspects of these issues from a marxist perspective. The author maintains that all these issues can be understood only in the context of the dominant position occupied by the Assamese speaking middle class of the Brahmaputra Valley. He shows that the tensions which prevail in the contemporary Assamese Society are the results of the politics practised by the middle class, destined to play the role of the most advanced section in an area marked by near colonial exploitation and poly-ethnic demography.

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### About the Author :

Apurba Kumar Baruah started teaching political science in 1970 as a lecturer in the Dibrugarh University Assam. From 1977 to 1981, he was Teacher-fellow in the Punjab University, Chandigarh. He obtained his Ph. D from the Punjab University for his thesis on *David Easton : An analysis of his contribution to Political Theory*. He taught in Dibrugarh University again from 1981 to 1985 and then joined the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, as a Reader. He is at present a professor of Political Science in the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Baruah has published a large number of research papers in various journals and books, edited by prominent academics. He was one of the editors of the *North-East quarterly, a journal of Social Science Research*. He is the author of *Systems Analysis in Political Science (A Marxist critique of David Easton)*. He occasionally contributes to Assamese Journals and News papers. His current interests are student movements and nationalities question in India.

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by Apurba Kumar Baruah

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## PREFACE

During the eighties I have had the occasion of participating in a large number of national and regional seminars which discussed various problems relating to contemporary Assamese politics. While some of those seminars discussed problems arising out of the emergence of regional politics others sought to examine the roots of social tensions in Assam politics. While writing papers for those seminars I seemed to have focussed mainly on four themes — Assamese nationalism, Assamese-Bengali relations, emergence of student power in Assam, and the problem of concentration of landed property and its consequences for the Assamese society. But all seminar papers are written under two major constraints — (1) The authors have to meet the deadlines set by the organizers, and (2) they have to keep in mind that the paper will have to be presented within the time specified by the panel chairmen, which is, more often than not, 10 to 15 minutes. Knowing the difficulties involved in organizing and conducting academic seminars one can't blame the organisers for these constraints. But these constraints do effect the quality of the arguments developed in the sense that very often authors can only mention points but do not have the opportunity of developing those fully. Sometimes they do this during the course of discussions that follow the presentation of the papers. But even that is not quite satisfactory. Moreover, a seminar paper is expected to generate discussions and therefore authors have to chose a particular aspect of the issue or the problem suggested by the organisers to develop a pointed argument. As a result such papers never become comprehensive discussions. But they do make the authors do some intensive thinking. While going through some such papers that I have presented in seminars I found that to develop

the arguments presented in those papers it is necessary to combine some of those and thus to prepare longer articles. I also realized that all the arguments I presented in those papers in fact focus on the nature of the politics in Assam today. This politics acquires its main characteristics from the fact that it is dominated by the Assamese speaking middle class of the Brahmaputra valley. It has become obvious to me that in any attempt at understanding the political processes and also the sources of social tensions in contemporary Assam it is not possible to ignore the influences of this class.

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For the students of politics of Assam and also for those who are interested in the life of the people of contemporary Assam, the most important issues are those which are connected with the politics of the smaller nationalities of the State, like the Bodos, Karbis, Mishings and the Koch-Rajbangshis. Each one of these communities are now trying to assert their own identity. It is these assertions and the responses of the Assamese Middle class to those that generate the most critical problems of the contemporary Assamese society. But the attitude and the behaviour of these smaller communities can't be understood without examining the nature of Assamese nationalism. The nature of Assamese nationalism itself of course must be understood in the context of the socio-economic forces that generated this nationalism. While this aspect of the Assamese politics requires a lot of research into the process of social formation and therefore could be the subject of more than one book I have tried to put my thoughts on the matter together in the article on Assamese national question. The argument developed here was in fact lying scattered in the articles I have written on the topics like Assamese nationalism, regionalism in North-East India, xenophobic tendencies

in Assamese society, my comments on the role of Assamese elite and also in my responses to the views of others on the Assam agitation. These articles and comments written sometimes in English and at other times in Assamese were published in various journals. I have now put them together to arrive at some conclusions. However, certain aspects of this issue remain neglected and I hope to discuss those in another paper. Articles on Ambikagiri and Assamese-Bengali relations and the role of Bengali elite focus on tendencies of some historians to interpret the chauvinistic tendencies in Assamese society in terms of evil designs of the Assamese speaking middle class. I argue that while some of these accusations are baseless (like those against Ambikagiri) others are based on one sided opinions. In fact, these two articles are attempts at showing that we need to examine these issues more closely. The two other articles on politics of land reforms and student power are attempts at showing that even such issues like land reforms and the role of students can't be examined without keeping the position of the Assamese middle class in mind. Though the articles included in this book are on different topics the common thread that binds them together is the issue of the position of the middle class in the Assamese society and its consequences.

The arguments presented in these articles have been greatly influenced by my interaction with the participants of the seminars for which I wrote papers on related themes and also by the comments of those who participated in the debates on some of these themes in journals like *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Frontier*, *Man and Development* and *North-East Quarterly*. I take this opportunity to record my thanks to all of them. Finally I must acknowledge the fact that most of my ideas presented here

took their present shape in the course of my continuous discussions with my wife, Manorama Sharma (of the History Department of North-Eastern Hill University) and at my attempts at proving her wrong which failed more often than not. I must however state that I am solely responsible for the views expressed here. I take this opportunity to thank Sri Nabin Baruah of Purbanchal Prakash for agreeing to publish the book and also for his constant reminders which expedited the work. I must sincerely thank Mr. Joseph F. Khongbuh for typing out the manuscript to meet my time needs.

May 16, 1990

APURBA KUMAR BARUAH  
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